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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: SINHALESE VOTE CARRIES PRESIDENT'S
PARTY TO VICTORY IN REGIONAL ELECTIONS

REF: 08 COLOMBO 727

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Sinhalese voters delivered resounding victories to President Rajapaksa's UPFA coalition in the Northwestern (NWP) and Central (CP) Provincial elections on February 14. The results reflected the Sinhalese majority's strong endorsement of Rajapaksa's military focus in combating the LTTE. However, the results exposed substantial defections to the opposition from the two leading political parties that traditionally represent "Up-Country" Tamils, both of which ran with the President's coalition. The ruling alliance also appeared to fare poorly with Muslim voters, failing to elect any Muslim candidates. The Marxist, Sinhalese nationalist JVP was roundly defeated, securing just one seat in the NWP council. The parties now turn to the Western Provincial Council campaign, with the election to take place probably in early April. End Summary.

Sinhalese Vote for President's Alliance

¶2. (SBU) Sinhalese voters gave President Rajapaksa's ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) coalition a solid victory, with a moderate voter turnout of 60 - 65%. In the two districts with the highest percentage of Sinhalese voters (Matale in Central Province and Kurunegala in NWP), the UPFA received a whopping 70% of the vote. The opposition UNP, historically Sri Lanka's strongest party, garnered only 27%. The nationalist JVP and other minor parties received the remaining 3% of votes. Commenting on the results, President Rajapaksa characterized his party's victory as, "an election that defeated all foreign and local elements which belittled the victorious march of heroic soldiers... The intelligent voters have used this election to beat the destructive elements who were spreading falsehoods against the government while also endorsing the government's efforts to eradicate terrorism and strengthen democracy."

¶3. (C) In an early February meeting, the President's pollster Sunimal Fernando relayed to PolOff that his surveys showed the President in a strong political position not just on the war, but also because voters gave him credit for delivering development projects, specifically roads, that were improving their quality of life. The President, whose popularity remains higher than that of his party, was a constant presence in UPFA campaign literature and on

billboards (even though such endorsements of one party by an incumbent President are technically illegal).

"Hill Tamil" Parties Suffer a Setback

¶4. (SBU) The two main political parties which represent Tamil tea plantation workers, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Up-Country People's Front (UPF), both contested the election under the UPFA banner. Although the government's pro-war stance and poor human rights record are not generally popular with their constituents, the two parties' cooperation with the government followed the normal pattern of Hill Country politicians of aligning themselves with whichever party holds power in the central government. In the past, this has worked to secure important government positions and associated resources, which are then distributed as patronage to their community. In a striking rebuke, Hill Tamils in surprisingly large numbers voted for the UNP. By comparison, in the 2004 Central Province election, the CWC was able to elect 10 members coalition with the UNP, and the UPF 2. This time, the CWC won only 3 seats and the UPF was wiped out. Instead, 6 Tamils were elected on the UNP ticket. No Muslim candidates were elected from the UPFA list, either, but several UNP Muslim candidates were successful.

¶5. (C) Minister of Tourism Milinda Moragoda (protect) told Ambassador that despite the government's win, he was not especially cheered by the results, because the ruling alliance had fared so poorly in minority areas. Moragoda said the election results stressed the need for the GSL to reach out to minorities - which, he reported, the President understands. Shortly after the election results were made public, the President announced an invitation to Tamil political party leaders, including the LTTE-aligned Tamil National Alliance, for a discussion about future political arrangements in the north.

Sinhalese Nationalist JVP All But Eliminated

¶6. (SBU) In a repeat of its August 2008 Provincial Council elections performance (Ref A), the government's strong stand against the LTTE left little political room for the Marxist, nationalist JVP to appeal to voters. The party received between 1-2% of the vote in each district and was only able to secure 1 seat in Kurunegala (NWP). Writing in the Daily Mirror on February 17, Harim Peiris, a member of former President Kumaratunga's government wrote, "the real loser of the election was the JVP, (which) has hit a nadir and it's hard to see a road to a quick electoral recovery for them... the political project of being more nationalist than the (UPFA) is now not possible, there is little political space there, at a provincial level that space may be 2%, as the JVP discovered through the election."

Next Up: The Western Province

¶7. (SBU) During the NWP and CP campaign the government announced the dissolution of the Western Provincial Council (WPC), which includes Colombo. Nominations for candidates are due February 26; the most likely election date appears to be April 4. Initial press reports indicated that Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa would be the UPFA's Chief Ministerial candidate in the WPC. More recent political columns have floated other names, however. If he chooses to contest, Basil would likely try to replicate former President Kumaratunga's success in using the WPC Chief Ministerial post as a stepping-stone to higher office. In this case, it is thought that Basil's brother, President Mahinda Rajapaksa, could appoint him Prime Minister after Parliamentary elections due by April 2010. (Note: Kumaratunga became President in 2004 just ten months after launching her political comeback by becoming Chief Minister of the Western Province.)

¶8. (C) COMMENT: A quarter of Sri Lanka's voters live in the

NWP and CP electorates and 30-35% reside in the Western Province. On the heels of the government's victories in August 2008, a strong showing in areas representing a majority of Sri Lanka's voters would represent a clear endorsement by the Sinhalese majority of the President's military and development strategies. However, in a country where ethnic and religious minorities comprise 35% of the population, the President's weakness among minority voters remains his Achilles heel. His supporters privately worry that after the military phase of Sri Lanka's long ethnic conflict ends, President Rajapaksa, like Winston Churchill after World War II, may lose support as the public focuses increasingly on economic issues.

Blake